

EVALUATION OF THE REVITALISATION OF MERDEKA SQUARE IN MEDAN CITY

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Abstract:

Merdeka Square of Medan City is a cultural heritage that has been designated based on the Decree of the Mayor of Medan. As a cultural heritage, besides being the city's identity and landmark, Merdeka Square also functions as a public space and green open space. The Medan City Government has carried out a revitalization project for Merdeka Square since 2022. The revitalization process should pay attention to conservation principles. The writing of this article aims to evaluate whether the revitalization process of Merdeka Square carried out by the Medan City Government is in accordance with the rules and guidelines of cultural heritage revitalization. So far, in principle, the revitalization process has paid attention to the objectives of cultural heritage conservation, but there are things that need to be criticized regarding its implementation, including destructive construction techniques and the lack of socialization to the community regarding the revitalization design and impact mitigation studies from the implementation of revitalization.

Keywords:

Conservation, Revitalization, Cultural Heritage, Evaluation.

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1. Introduction

Public space is an important part of urban areas, playing a role in community social life. It serves as a place to enhance social cohesion, a place for people to gather and participate in social activities, and a place to relax and enjoy the beauty of nature. These public spaces can affect the quality of the local environment, physical, economic and psychological conditions of the local community (Omar et al., 2018). Public spaces are often part of historical objects such as the esplanade in Medan City, which is now known as Merdeka Square. Merdeka Square in Medan City is a cultural heritage object,

designated by the decision of the mayor of Medan City number 433/V/28K/X/2021. As a cultural heritage object, Merdeka Square in Medan City has a function as a historical object that reminds the history of the journey of Medan City and the values in it. It also functions as a green open space that cannot be built on. Currently, the field is used for public recreation, but the facilities are inadequate and some of them do not comply with cultural heritage regulations. Therefore, revitalisation is needed to improve infrastructure, services, empowerment and community participation (Wisdianti, 2022).

Revitalisation is one of the conservation practices. Revitalisation is a response to globalisation and is considered effective in addressing the impacts of development in historic cities. The revitalisation process involves rejuvenating cultural heritage to suit the needs of the present (Samadi & Mohd Yunus, 2018). It aims to revive areas or parts that have declined, by reorganising spatial functions, cultural values, and strengthening information about cultural heritage (Wisdianti, 2022). It is also considered the best strategy to create optimal public spaces in historic sites, which can be accessed by people from different backgrounds and become a place for various social activities (Omar et al., 2018).

Since 2022, the city government of Medan has been conducting revitalisation activities for the Merdeka Square in the city of Medan. This revitalisation project will be carried out on a multi-year basis from 2022-2024 (Pemko Medan, 2022). The purpose of this revitalisation is to restore the image of Merdeka Square as a historical landmark, restore its function as a green open space, and optimise the facilities of Merdeka Square as a public space (Henry & Surya, 2023). However, the implementation of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in the city of Medan has met with some resistance from the community. According to the Medan Kompas website, the Civil Society Coalition (KMS) of Medan City filed a lawsuit against the mayor of Medan regarding this revitalisation project. They believe that the revitalisation work carried out by the Medan city government has actually damaged Merdeka Square. There are two conflicting views between the Medan city government and the local community. This has led to the need for an evaluation of the implementation of the revitalisation of Medan Merdeka Square to check whether the revitalisation carried out is in accordance with the principles of conservation.

Previous studies on the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City focused more on offering revitalisation concepts, such as the concept of urban acupuncture proposed by Henry and Surya (2023). In addition, other studies focus on evaluating the quality of concrete as a construction material, such as the research conducted by Budiman and Hanova (2023). However, to this present day, there is no study that specifically evaluates the implementation of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square from the perspective of cultural heritage preservation principles.

The article's main difference with previous research lies in the emphasis of evaluation, which assesses the suitability of revitalisation practices in maintaining important values and whether the process is in accordance with the principles of preservation and conservation of cultural heritage. This is important because Merdeka

Square is not only a public space, but also a cultural heritage site whose authenticity and integrity must be preserved.

This article discusses how the implementation of the revitalisation of Medan City's Merdeka Square by the Medan City Government in 2022-2024 affects its image, function, and integrity as a green open space and historical landmark. The study also examines the extent to which the revitalisation is in accordance with the rules of cultural heritage preservation. The purpose of this research is to understand the concept of importance, authenticity, and integrity of Medan Merdeka Square as a guideline in the implementation of revitalisation. In addition, this research also aims to evaluate the implementation of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City, whether it is in accordance with the principles of cultural heritage conservation.

2. Method

The approach used in writing this article is literature study and comparative analysis. Literature study was conducted to collect reference documents related to the principles of preservation or conservation of cultural heritage such as the Venice Charter, Burra Charter, Cultural Heritage Law, and also the Guidelines for the Implementation of Cultural Heritage Revitalisation issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research. Literature study was also conducted to collect documents related to the implementation of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City, including journals, online news and official news portals from Medan City Government. Qualitative comparative analysis was conducted to evaluate the implementation of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City by comparing various relevant aspects. The subjects compared include preservation or conservation principles, revitalisation guidelines, important values of Merdeka Square of Medan City, and the implementation of revitalisation that has been done. This analysis aims to assess the extent to which the revitalisation is in accordance with the principles of cultural heritage conservation.

3. Results and Discussion

Authenticity and integrity are elements that need to be considered in conserving cultural heritage. Authenticity and integrity refer to four parameters: design, material, workmanship and setting (Jokilehto, 2006). In addition to considering form and design, material and substance, location and setting, the concept of authenticity also considers the value of attributes such as use and function, tradition, technical and management systems, language and other forms of intangible heritage, spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors (UNESCO, 2005). The conservation guidelines according to the Venice Charter in Article 5, explain that the purpose of conservation is to make the monument socially usable. Utilisation is allowed by not changing the layout or decoration of buildings and monuments, except for changes within certain permitted limits. Article 6 explains that the conservation of monuments means preserving a setting that is not out of scale and retains its traditional setting, there should be no new construction, demolition or modification that changes the period and colour (ICOMOS, 1964).

The value-based approach to conservation focuses on identifying and preserving the significance of cultural heritage (Olukoya, 2021). Understanding the value of a

heritage site is the basis for conservation decisions. Value-based conservation involves assessing its vulnerability to change, implementing conservation measures, and enhancing that value to maintain the authenticity of attributes that reflect its significance (Lockhart, 2008). Without consideration of significance, conservation interventions such as restoration, revitalisation and repair can actually diminish the authenticity of cultural heritage. Significant value is not limited to what is stated in the Cultural Heritage Law, but can be developed according to the significance and characteristics of the cultural heritage (Tanudirjo, 2004).

3.1. Significances of Merdeka Square Medan

Merdeka Square is located in the centre of the city, which is the zero point of Medan City (Rambe et al., 2021). The transfer of the centre of government from Labuhan Deli to the centre of Medan City was the forerunner of the construction of Merdeka Square in Medan City (Sinambela & Ardhya Nareswari, 2020). In 1880, the Deli Maatschapij first established Medan City's Merdeka Square, which at the time was referred to as the Esplanade. Its function was as a public space and town square. It was also to improve the quality of cleanliness and beauty of Medan City, which at that time was suffering from a malaria outbreak (Maulana, 2011).

After the establishment of the Deli Spoor Weg and Medan Great Station in 1885, the Esplanade functioned as a transit space for railway passengers. The Esplanade also serves as a green open space for pedestrians from the station to the Medan Hotel to the south. Government buildings such as the Post Office, City Hall, Bank Java, NHN Office, Harison Office and Crossfield around the esplanade started to be built in 1909 after Medan became a Gementee or Kota Madya (Thamrin, 2003). These buildings with colonial architecture influenced the image of the esplanade. The esplanade played an important role in the formation of the colonial spatial pattern that has become the identity of Medan City until today (Maulana, 2011).



Figure 1. Merdeka Square in 1887.

Source: <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/>.

The Esplanade then became the venue for major events such as welcoming state guests, celebrating the birthday of the Queen of the Netherlands, and other major events. In 1923, the Esplanade was used to organise a large night market that was held every year. Various festivals were organised to fulfil the community's need for open space as a place for social, economic and cultural activities. The Esplanade was generally used as a sports ground. In 1927, the Esplanade was turned into a city park with the concept of an English garden pattern, which became the venue for the society music

club in the northern part of the esplanade in front of the society building (Thamrin, 2003).

During the Japanese occupation, around 1943, the esplanade was renamed foekoeraiido. On the field, a monument to the victory of the Japanese army in Sumatra was built. This shows that Medan Merdeka Square witnessed the political recognition of power. In 1945, in October, the first ceremony to withdraw the Indonesian flag was held in East Sumatra (Thamrin, 2003). It was also there that the sovereignty of the State of East Sumatra was handed over to the Republic of Indonesia (Maulana, 2011). After the Republic of Indonesia became independent, this field was renamed Merdeka Square (Thamrin, 2003).

In the 1970s, a 400-metre athletic running track was built at Merdeka Square which was used for training for PASI athletes. The track is also used for exercise by the community in the morning and evening. Community activities in Merdeka Square have not changed much over the past 50 years. This can be seen in the daily activities carried out by the community at Merdeka Square in Medan City such as exercising, sightseeing, and relaxing (Thamrin, 2003).

Based on this description, it can be synthesised that Merdeka Square in Medan City has historical value, social value, and scientific value that needs to be preserved. The historical value is reflected in the chronology of the construction of Merdeka Square until now which is the place of various historical events that occurred in Medan City. Merdeka Square of Medan City is also a landmark for Medan City which has a role in creating the image and identity of Medan City. The social value of Merdeka Square of Medan City is reflected in its function as a public space and green open space that plays an important role in fulfilling people's needs for activities and socialising as well as fulfilling recreational and circulation needs for the community. The scientific value is reflected in the existence of Merdeka Square of Medan City which becomes a benchmark for the spatial pattern of Medan City.

3.2. The Urgency of Revitalising Medan's Merdeka Square

As a Cultural Heritage object, Merdeka Square of Medan City has a function as a historical object that reminds the history of Medan City's journey along with the values in it. In addition, it also functions as a green open space that is not allowed to be built on it. However, along with urban development and the increasing need for land, there are changes in the elements of the space-forming buildings in the Merdeka Square area. For example, in 2005, a culinary area known as Merdeka Walks was built on the Merdeka Square area in Medan. This area carries a modern building concept that contrasts with the surrounding environment with colonial architecture (Maulana, 2011). Other elemental changes are also reflected in the row of second-hand bookseller stalls at Merdeka Square Medan. The bookseller kiosks started to appear since 2003 on the east side of Merdeka Square Medan (Henry & Surya, 2023). In terms of arrangement design, the row of kiosks obstructs the view from the railway station towards Merdeka Square Medan. This reduces the historical value of Merdeka Square as a square and open space (Rambe et al., 2021). It affects the change of identity and decreases the value and image of Merdeka Square Medan (Maulana, 2011).

The utilisation and development of Medan Merdeka Square needs to be improved with a design that complies with applicable regulations, including a minimum KDH of 80%. This is important so that the function of the square as an ecological balancer of the environment, as well as its social, economic, cultural, and historical values are maintained and not extinct in the future (Henry & Surya, 2023). Currently, the square is used for community recreation, but the facilities are inadequate and some do not comply with cultural heritage regulations. Revitalisation is needed to meet the infrastructure needs of Medan Merdeka Square to optimise its function as a green open space and public space for the community (Wisdianti, 2022).

3.3. The Revitalisation of Medan's Merdeka Square

The revitalisation of Medan City's Merdeka Square is a multiyear project organised by the Medan City Government through the Public Works Office, which is carried out from 2022 and planned to be completed in 2024. The concept of revitalisation of Merdeka Square is to restore its function as a cultural heritage, public space, and green open space by removing the existing buildings above Merdeka Square. Optimisation of the basement is used to move the buildings above Merdeka Square. Basements are considered a valuable resource for locating urban structures and infrastructure. The purpose of using the basement is to optimise the upper part of Merdeka Square in Medan as a field and green open space. In addition, the aim is to restore the visual image of Merdeka Square (Henry & Surya, 2023).

Based on the planning of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City, a public stage and supporting facilities will be built by applying the concept of preserving historical urban space with contemporary design (Malau, 2022). The people's stage, dog house (additional building for various utilities room purposes), chimney, lobby area, and canopy, jogging track, outdoor sports and fitness court, skate park, park, children's play area, and Tugu Proklamasi will be placed on the surface of Merdeka Square of Medan City. Two basement floors will be built. In basement 1, a police station, cultural heritage area management office, Medan City museum, City Planning Gallery, UMKM area, retail area, prayer room, public toilet, and two- and four-wheeled vehicle parking area will be built. In basement 2, the Medan City Hall, art gallery, auditorium, and two-wheel and four-wheel car parking areas will be built, among others. These two basements accommodate 425 four-wheeled parking lots and 381 two-wheeled parking lots (Pemko Medan, 2022).

The project involves cleaning the field including the trees in Medan Merdeka Square, but the trees will be replanted. However, the Trembesi Trees that have existed for a long time and have significance in Medan City's Merdeka Square will be maintained (Pemko Medan, 2022). Regarding the Zero Point Monument in Medan's Merdeka Square, it is planned to rebuild it according to its original form. The monument is not a cultural heritage building because it has been altered beyond its original form. In addition, the monument currently covers the Medan Post Office, which is a cultural heritage building. Therefore, in this revitalisation activity, the Zero Point Monument will be re-conceptualised (Pemko Medan, 2022).

The project will be carried out in several stages. Based on Pemkomedan's website, the first phase of the revitalisation work is targeted to be completed by February 2023. The phase I revitalisation work includes the installation of drill piles and excavation for the basement. Major works in phase I include the installation of more than 1,800 drill piles and excavation for basement construction (Pemko Medan, 2023).

Second stage of the project began in May 2023. Stage II involves mechanical, electrical, and plumbing works. Mechanical and plumbing works include clean water installation, clean water recycling installation, dirty water installation, rainwater installation, fire fighting installation, and air conditioning and ventilation installation. Electrical work includes panel work and feeder cables, cable trays, lighting and contact stocks, lightning rods and grounding as well as utility work and PLN connections. Work was also carried out to procure elevators for mobility in the building. Electrical works also include fire alarm works, lighting, communication and information technology, and CCTV system installation works (Pemko Medan, 2023).

The drainage system has been carefully planned to prevent Merdeka Square from becoming a waterlogged area. Various technologies have been applied, including the use of a longstorage system with a capacity of about 48 thousand cubic metres. The drainage arrangement in Merdeka Square is also integrated with the Kesawan old town arrangement programme (Pemko Medan, 2022). Work on the drainage system was carried out in stage II. The works include preparatory works, drainage works and long term storage (a system of holding and storing water for a certain time before it is flowed into the main sewerage system), appurtenances, pumps, and instrumentation as well as drainage works and infiltration ponds (Pemko Medan, 2023).

3.4. Evaluation of the Revitalisation of Medan's Merdeka Square

The revitalisation evaluation was conducted to assess whether the revitalisation activities of Merdeka Square in Medan City were carried out in accordance with the revitalisation guidelines and conservation principles. Based on the revitalisation guidelines, the purpose of revitalisation is to regenerate the important value of cultural heritage with the adjustment of new functions that do not conflict with the principles of preservation and cultural values of the community (Kemdikbud, 2013). Based on this objective, the implementation of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City has a goal that is in line with that conveyed in the revitalisation guidelines of Kemdikbud. The purpose of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square of Medan City is to regenerate the image of Merdeka Square of Medan City as it was when it was still an Esplanade, namely as a green open space and public space by optimising facilities that can be used by the community.

Based on the revitalisation guideline, the main principles in carrying out the revitalisation are reorganising the function of the space, regenerating the cultural values and strengthening the cultural heritage information. These three principles are fulfilled in the revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City. The removal of the buildings above Merdeka Square is part of the spatial planning effort, which aims to restore the value of Medan Merdeka Square as an open space without visual obstruction to other cultural heritage buildings around Merdeka Square in Medan City. The relocation of

culinary areas and book stalls in Merdeka Square is an effort to restore the image of Merdeka Square as a green open space. The addition of various support facilities is also an optimisation to improve the facilities of Merdeka Square Medan as a public space that meets the needs of the community. The next revitalisation principle is to strengthen cultural heritage information. This is achieved through the construction of the People's Stage, as well as the Medan Art Gallery, which is a means of promoting cultural values and also a means of historical and cultural information from the development of the city of Medan itself.

The effort to maintain the trembesi trees that have existed since ancient times and have significance in Merdeka Square of Medan City is also in accordance with the revitalisation rules in maintaining the landscape of the cultural heritage. The plan to replant trees in Merdeka Square Medan is also an effort to restore the function of Merdeka Square Medan as a green open space.

Based on the revitalisation plan of Merdeka Square in Medan City, the aim is to improve the function of Merdeka Square in Medan City as its original function, and also to meet the needs of urban communities in Medan City today. However, there are some problems in the revitalisation activities. According to the community, the construction of a basement will damage Merdeka Square in Medan City. The construction of a basement by excavating the surface of the square is considered to damage the square itself. This, of course, contradicts the rules of revitalisation and the principles of conservation, which must take into account the concept of authenticity. Demolition and reconstruction will certainly cause the cultural heritage to lose its authenticity.

Constructing a basement in cultural heritage is a sensitive project and requires a careful approach to ensure that the significance, authenticity and integrity of the cultural heritage is maintained. Basement construction should utilise non-destructive methods to protect the structure of the cultural heritage. Although the concept of adaptation is allowed in the development of cultural heritage, a complete overhaul is not appropriate when there are other techniques that are not destructive to the cultural heritage.

In addition, the emergence of cons among the community shows the lack of a public consultation process in this revitalisation activity. The community needs to be involved in the revitalisation process starting from the planning. Moreover, the revitalised object is a cultural heritage object so it needs to be careful so that the work does not eliminate the value of the cultural heritage. Transparency related to the results of feasibility studies and technical studies of revitalisation work and revitalisation designs need to be conveyed to the community. As in the revitalisation guidelines that technical work related to construction requires a study in advance to review the stability of the construction before and after revitalisation if a new building is constructed.



Figure 2. Dredging process on The Merdeka Square.

Source: <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2023/04/06/wali-kota-medan-digugat-warga-negara-soal-revitalisasi-lapangan-merdeka>.

Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) is also mandatory for projects related to cultural heritage. The HIA is required to assess the negative and positive impacts on important values, attributes and the environment and provide mitigation recommendations for possible negative impacts. The HIA also provides alternatives for development that are compatible with preservation (Kemdikbud, 2021). The landscape arrangement and revitalisation activities of Merdeka Square in Medan also require a HIA document that is socialised to the community.

Meeting the needs of space in modern times is often at odds with maintaining the integrity and authenticity of cultural heritage. This revitalisation project does have a positive impact on the community by optimising the function of Merdeka Square in Medan City as a green open space and public space. In addition, the visual design on the surface of Merdeka Square is also conceptualised to restore its image as Esplanade in its time. However, inappropriate workmanship techniques actually damaged the authenticity of Merdeka Square itself, causing Merdeka Square to lose its authenticity and integrity. Therefore, the negative impact of the basement excavation can threaten the loss of cultural heritage status of Merdeka Square in Medan City.

Some things that need to be criticised in the implementation of the revitalisation of Merdeka Square of Medan City are the lack of socialisation of the concepts of significance, authenticity, and integrity of Merdeka Square of Medan City, so that it becomes a grey area related to which changes can be made and which ones cannot be made and how the workmanship techniques are allowed so as not to eliminate the three elements of significance. This should be obtained from the feasibility study prior to revitalisation. The second thing is that the technical study and construction study as well as the design of the revitalisation were not submitted openly from the beginning to the community, causing a lack of social control over the implementation of the revitalisation project. The third is the absence or lack of socialisation of the Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment. This shows a lack of public consultation and public involvement in the revitalisation process. Although this revitalisation project is a government project, public involvement is necessary because the purpose of revitalisation is for the welfare of the community so the community also needs to provide input and supervision of the revitalisation implementation.

4. Conclusion

The revitalisation of Merdeka Square in Medan City has an impact on its image, function, and integrity as a green open space and historical landmark. Merdeka Square has important values that include historical, social, and scientific values, which should be a guideline in every stage of revitalisation. Revitalisation was carried out by moving the building to the basement to restore its function as a public space and green open space. However, the destructive technique of the work raises concerns about its impact on the physical integrity of Merdeka Square as a cultural heritage. In addition, the revitalisation has faced criticism regarding the lack of information disclosure, such as feasibility studies, cultural heritage impact assessments, and the lack of public consultation in the planning process.

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